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The Language of the Birds: A Ceramic Exploration of Alchemical Transmutation

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Abstract

How can the medieval ideas and concepts of alchemy be translated into a body of contemporary ceramic work? The term alchemical transmutation can be used to describe an action on the physical level (the purification and transformation of metals) as well as an action on the metaphysical level (the purification of the spirit and the transformation of mankind). The realm of alchemy is one of corresponding duality, from its very definition to the related symbol structures and allegories. Various initiatory aspects of the artist's own life provided inspiration for fulfilling the metaphysical aspect of transmutation, while the medium of ceramics, which undergoes a transformation from common earth into lasting work, mimics the act of physical transformation. Alchemical allegories are explored through obsessive and repetitive acts of creation in ceramics, leading to the development of personal symbols and a deeper understanding of self.

1. Introduction

Alchemical transmutation has a strong history of lending artistic and spiritual inspiration throughout the ages. In her book, *Astrology, Magic and Alchemy in Art*, Matilde Battistini states, "Alchemy is a form of knowledge that aims to transform the individual psychologically and spiritually by channeling the creative energies that permeate nature and the human mind. It comprises a practical part based on detailed knowledge of matter and its elements, and an initiatory art, expressed metaphorically in the myth of the transmutation of base metals into gold."¹ The latter part of the description of transmutation speaks to the popular view of alchemy as the act of changing lead into gold, and the search for the philosopher's stone, the material that would make such change possible.

Practical alchemy has led to the discovery of alcoholic distillation, the composition of porcelain and the invention of gunpowder, all three very important and course changing discoveries in human history. However, on the metaphysical level, theoretical alchemy is a specific knowledge dealing with the harmony of opposites and the integration of all aspects of human experience, and the dualities therein: male versus female, dark versus light, physical versus philosophical. The pathway of experience is the pathway to initiation and growth. Fred Gettings explains in regards to the 'genuine' alchemist in his book, *Occult Art*, "The gold he sought was not a metal at all. Rather than taking the path to worldly riches, the alchemist was seeking an inner secret, looking for the way to develop his own inner vision and understanding. The gold of the alchemists was sometimes called Mercury or the Inner Sun ... The genuine alchemists were concerned with spiritual things. They did not look into dross metals, such as lead or iron, to seek out their magical gold. Instead they looked into the dross of man, that ordinary, untransformed inner life of man, which they visualized as sort of dead weight, containing more riches of miraculous powers than anyone could ever imagine. They believed that, if they worked at this lower part of man, they might refine it as to change it into the higher life."² The chosen title for this paper, *The Language of the Birds*, refers to the mythological belief held across multiple cultures that one who has been initiated into and practices these higher

principles of metaphysics is able to understand and communicate with birds, which are thought to possess the divine language of the universe.



Fig. 1. *The Alchemist in His Laboratory*, Hans Vredeman de Vries, illustration, 1595

2. Creation and Inspiration

Using clay as a medium and metaphor for both personal experience and expression allows for an exploration of internal struggles and reflects the changes seen both in myself and in my interaction with the world through this journey of transmutation. The first piece created for the exhibition is *Churaevka*, based on my first recollection of consciousness as a human. For the first two years of my life, I lived at what is called Churaevka, or 'Russian Village', in Southbury, Connecticut. Churaevka was an art colony founded in 1925 by the authors Count Ilia Tolstoy and George Grebenschikoff, Russian refugees fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. In 1988, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Even after my family moved to New Milford, Connecticut when I was two, we still held close ties with the original immigrants (who were then in their 70's and 80's), and would visit often. I have fond memories of time spent playing in the woods and visiting with the woman who had goats in her yard.

Pulling from the influences and first experiences I had with art, primarily the angularity of Russian orthodox iconography and the Faberge egg, I hand built porcelain eggs on which I then applied transfers of my earliest drawings. Nestled in an ornate bowl, the eggs represent the beginning of my journey and illustrate my first idea of the individual. My earliest drawings clearly laid the groundwork for other artistic themes I would explore in that they are made up of highly repetitive figures, heads with no mouths, over and over. The egg forms also reflect the

idea of the philosopher's egg, the symbolic receptacle in which the 'Great Work' is incubated. Often hung in medieval churches, (Figure 2) the egg was seen as an allegory and reminder of inner enlightenment.

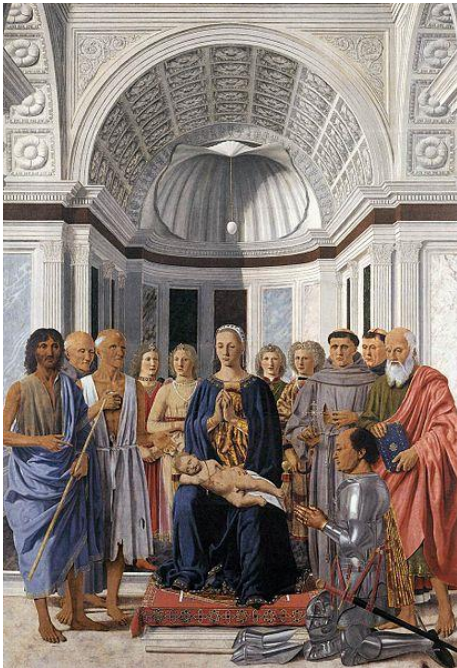


Fig. 2. *Brera Madonna* Piero della Francesca 1472–1474, tempera on panel, 98 x 59 inches.

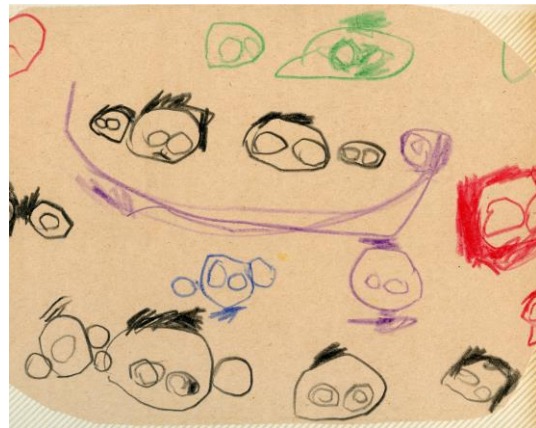


Fig. 3. *Untitled*, Mary Katherine Donovan 1981, crayon on paper, 8 x 11 inches.



Fig. 4. *Churaevka*, Mary Katherine Donovan, porcelain, 14 x 11.5 x 11.5 inches.



Fig. 5. Detail from *Churaevka*, stoneware and Mary Katherine Donovan, 2012

Within this body of work, *A Small Army of Various Vessels for Alchemical Transmutation* was created as a direct result from the exploration of repetition in *Churaevka*, and individually addresses various initiatory experiences of

my past. The uniform shape of the vessels draws influence from the urns of the Ancient Greeks with their use of pedestal feet and small, lidded necks. Conventional language of ceramic vocabulary often mimics human anatomy, and is used when discussing the make-up of vessels. The vessel is therefore composed of the foot, belly, shoulders, neck and lip of the rim.

Alchemical processes are traditionally shown taking place in bottles, wherein the bottle is symbolic of the human soul and the changes taking place in the illustrated bottle are references to the growth on the metaphysical level of the initiate. Alchemists believe that, “In the human body, the alchemical vase corresponds to the solar plexus and the head, the latter being the seat of the intellect and creative imagination.”⁴ The functional vessels of containment created in this body of work speak to the metaphorical aspect of the human form holding the psyche and various emotional expressions and states. Emulating the ancient, classical, simple forms provides reference to the ceramic tradition and allow for a clean “canvas” that is enhanced by adding protective attachments.

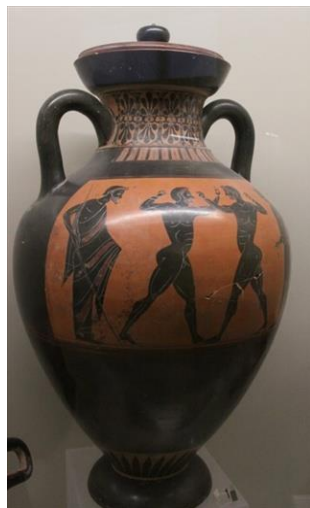


Fig. 6. Etruscan Funerary Urn, c. 500 BC



Fig. 7. From the *Splendor Solis*, 1582, illuminated manuscript on vellum with gold, 12.6 x 8.6 inches.

Each piece begins on the potter’s wheel. Through the act of centering the clay on the wheel, the potter mentally brings center to oneself and creates the forms that will be the base of the work; body, pedestal, and lid. The process of developing the skill set necessary to center a lump of earth on the spinning wheel can be embarrassingly awkward. The initial learning curve is an extremely frustrating series of failures while muscle memory is being formed. Through the repetition of allowing yourself to fail, a ritual of ego sacrifice is formed, mimicking the first stage of alchemical transmutation: cleansing and purification.

In regards to the wheel, Battistini states, “The wheel is a symbol of cosmic, natural, and psychic totality, and as such it contains the seeds of contradiction and duplicity, founding principles of the Hermetic magistry.”⁵ The wheel has a tradition of symbology in mysticism as being representative of the cycles of life, the four seasons, the twelve months, birth and death, and the four humours: melancholia, cholera, sanguine, and phlegmatic.⁶ The humour of melancholia is long tied to artistic endeavors. Believed by Aristotle to be the temperament of the creative artist, with so many of those who became high ranking in philosophy, politics, poetry, and the arts afflicted with melancholy⁷¹ In alchemy, Hermetic Saturn is the father of melancholia, intellectual contemplation, and imagination, as well as the patron god of artists. Of Saturn, Battistini writes, “In the Renaissance, in fact, there was a pervasive belief that being under the dominance of this planet would ensure a strong predisposition to intellectual pursuits, in addition to being a determining element of artistic genius. Saturn is related to the initial phase of the alchemical magistry, the nigredo (blackening) or “gate” of the Work, through which matter is purified and raised to a higher form of existence”⁸

Clay has a long history of being closely associated with spirituality on the metaphorical level. By shaping the clay, you begin to shape yourself and your personal journey. As a medium derived entirely from the earth itself, there is a primal connection felt by the current day potter with their ancestors, who used clay for both spiritual and utilitarian objects. All ceramic objects are projections of their creator, and reflect a specific period of time in the creator’s life,

encapsulating their emotional mindset at that time. Robert Pippenburg touches on these ideas in his book, *The Spirit of Clay: A Classic Guide to Ceramics*. He states, “The road to a greater sense of self through clay is not always easy and it cannot be traveled quickly. Why? Because your non-physical experiences of the human spirit must be translated to the physical world before they can have any permanent influence of transforming nature.”⁹

Additionally, “One comes to know oneself through a number of personal ways: love, friendships, parenthood, etc. and being creative. One way that one comes closer to understanding life and one’s own spirituality is in physically working with clay. Because working with clay is, above all, spiritual. It softens the encumbrances of the past, and of illusions, allowing the possibility of new self discovery.”¹⁰

During the process of making these ceramic works, after allowing the base pieces to harden, to facilitate trimming and assemblage, the attachments are made by either wheel-thrown, hand-built, or a combination of both techniques are used to create many smaller elements that are repetitively and obsessively attached to the body of the vessels. This creates a symbolic protection for the body and the space for transmutation from the exterior world.

The majority of the armor is made of a binary of either spikes or barnacles. The armor represents the duality of the external physical world interaction through the use of the spike, protruding into our daily lives, and the receptive qualities of the barnacle space, which represents the internal spiritual world within the self where one withdraws from the external world. This duality is also an important feature of metaphysical alchemical symbology, the attempt to find balance in all aspects of life.



Fig. 8. *The 3rd Pig Vs. The Big Bad Wolf*, Mary Katherine Donovan, 2012, stoneware, 20 x 10 x 10 inches.



Fig. 9. *Pine Cove Inn*, Mary Katherine Donovan, 2013, stoneware, 17 x 8 x 8 inches.

Although unrelated to alchemy, the spike on the lids of the *Small Army of Various Vessels* gain inspiration from the pointed Pickelhaube helmet, typically worn by the German military in the 19th and 20th century. The use of this militaristic reference helps to evoke the sense of armor and external defense mechanism. The formal and refined head and foot of the lid and pedestal with the chaotic middle canvas represents the attempts of one experiencing an anxiety attack to remain composed on the exterior. These thought patterns create a cycle of neurotic thinking where the afflicted fears the loss of control of their faculties. For the majority of my life I have struggled with issues of depression and anxiety, and the repetition found in this work serves as an act of meditation. I am able to create a space to live in, outside of my own head, while also referencing the repetitive thought patterns an anxiety attack induces.

Additionally, the visual aspect of the repetition and obsessive attachments illustrate the psychological defenses and barriers a person in a depressive state experiences. Long-term exposure to a depressive state often leaves the body

experiencing reoccurring feelings of the fight-or-flight response, an automatic physiological state in which the body prepares to either fight or flee from a perceived danger. By attaching exterior armor to the pieces, I am able to provide symbolic protection for the metaphorical body beneath, which is experiencing the fight response.

Surrounding these vessels in the installation of the exhibition, will be a small forest made of ceramic totems. The totems are composed of dozens of thrown forms stacked upon each other. The forest is a popular symbol in mysticism representing a sacred place and the deepest reaches of the unconscious, as well as the unknown.¹¹ The fairy tales that we read as young children also use the symbology of the woods, usually as the first part of the journey, in which the hero enters an unknown land and must overcome trials and tribulations, which can be viewed as the initiatory acts into transmutation, culminated in a more profound sense of self and the domination of evil. In short, the fairy tale closely mimics the ideas of metaphysical alchemy for young children in that, “a fairy tale’s psychological mission: resolving struggles between positive and negative forces in the self”¹² is similar to the alchemist’s desire to resolve these dual forces within their work. Robert Wasserman touches on the similarity of the forest as metaphor in fairy tales and alchemical initiatory experiences in his book, *Mystery Traditions*, “A common thread linking the initiatic experience in various Mystery Traditions is a descent of some kind into a dark and fearful underworld. Here the only protection is strength and faith-commitment to duty and a higher purpose whose agency will protect the candidate through the deadly trials that lie ahead. ... To prevail, the Initiate will battle to near exhaustion. He is then granted some form of reward, such as secret knowledge, the king’s daughter, wealth or eternal life.”¹³

To further the connection that is held by alchemical transmutation and ceramics, a ceramic pinhole camera was created on the wheel. The camera has the ability to make black and white paper negatives on an 8 x 10 inch sheet of traditional resin coated photographic paper. A set was designed and built to include symbols of transmutation, the black and white checkerboard once again referencing duality and the inclusion of seven stars to illustrate that what is happening in the photograph is occurring on the metaphysical level. From Gettings, “The word ‘astral’ is from the Latin aster, meaning ‘star.’ ... When the medieval artist wanted to suggest that the events he was depicting belong to the higher astral plane, he would set them against a background of pure gold, or against a background of stars, to indicate the ‘astrality’ of his subject.”¹⁴ Selected symbols were then photographed on this stage for a period of five hour exposures to allow enough light to enter the pinhole to form an image. The negative is then developed in a traditional darkroom, under an amber light. When the developed negative is sandwiched between a blank sheet of photographic paper and a sheet of glass with the light from a photographic enlarger illuminating it, a positive image is produced. Through this process the metaphor of alchemy is mimicked multiple times. Mud is changed to ceramic, which is then used to capture light, which then undergoes a chemical bath in a red light corresponding to the fire, creating a positive and negative image.



Fig.11. *Camera*, Mary Katherine Donovan, 2013, stoneware, 22 x 7 x 7 inches.

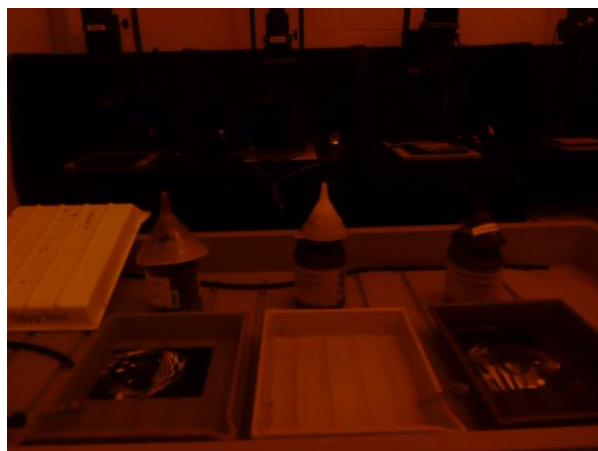


Fig. 12. *Developing images in the darkroom*, Mary Katherine Donovan, 2013, digital image



Fig. 13. *Philosopher's Egg*, Mary Katherine Donovan, 2013, paper negative on photographic paper, 8 x 10 inches



Fig. 13. *Philosopher's Egg*, Mary Katherine Donovan, 2013, paper positive on photographic paper, 8 x 10 inches

After the forms dry to a leather-hard state, they are placed in an electric kiln for firing. This act mimics the act of practical physical alchemy, the heating of materials in an alembic to purify and distill the lesser elements. Firing in a kiln is the stage in which the clay becomes ceramic and is no longer able to be recycled back into the earth as organic matter. High kiln temperatures drive out the water in the clay and fuse the molecules, creating an everlasting new body. The process of firing is highly similar to the metaphorical first stage of transmutation, in which the lesser is burned away from the soul to create a higher, more desirable level of spirituality. This is illustrated historically as the initiate in a bath over a fire in order to, "...burn away all of the darkness and dross of what was sometimes called the 'lower man'. The inner or higher man was eternal, linked with the eternal stars, and the alchemists believed that this could be reached and developed if everything lower was purged away by flame."¹⁵

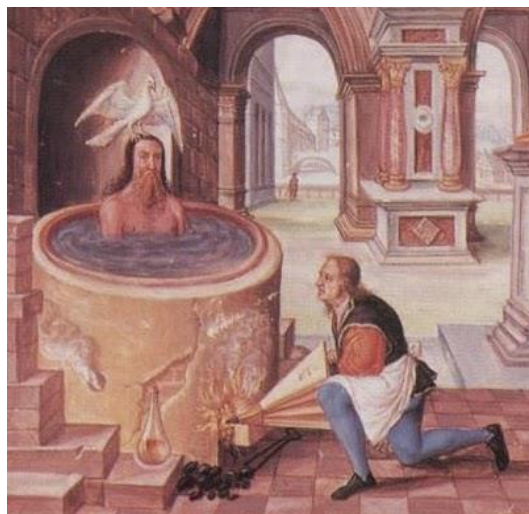


Fig. 11. Detail from the *Splendor Solis* illuminated manuscript, 1582

By selecting a restrained color palette for the finished works, emphasis is placed upon the vessel form and symbolism without unnecessary distraction. Black and white slips made from liquefied clay are painted on to reference the omnipresent ideas of duality embraced by alchemy. Occasionally a wash made of red iron oxide and water is applied to the raw clay body as a symbol of the firing process that is endured by both the clay and the initiate. The unadulterated clay body is used to represent the naked soul undergoing the transformative experience. Two select works, *Churaevka* and *The Third Little Pig*, are dark green in color, representative of the forest and the journey that is undertaken through transmutation.

3. Conclusion

The ultimate outcome of the alchemist, as described by Fred Gettings, is “to discover a secret whereby the wonderful powers he could feel in his own soul, or which he could sense within his own inner being, might be released into the world in their full glory.” Throughout prolonged exploration of my life experiences, I have been able to translate the long-standing alchemical symbology into a highly personal expression of contemporary ceramics. From my earliest inspiration at *Churaevka*, I was clearly on a path to examine my own concept of spirituality and how the rich tradition of iconography and symbols can be interpreted on a personal level as a metaphor and catalyst for growth. Throughout the creation of this body of work, I have been able to gain a new perspective on my own life experiences and can view them through the lens of alchemy as various initiatory rites that can be represented in the physical realm through ceramic processes. By becoming aware of these new perspectives, I am able to tune in to my ‘personal’ bird and its language inspiration that speaks to me through the processes of my creative drive, ultimately transforming both clay and myself into a tangible representation of the metaphysical experience. I intend to further investigate the correlation between ceramics, alchemical transmutation and my self in the future and am looking forward to combining my earlier processes with traditional pit and smoke firing.

4. Endnotes

1. Matilde Battistini. *Astrology, Magic and Alchemy in Art* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 25.
2. Fred Gettings. *The Occult in Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 140.
3. Matilde Battistini. *Symbols and Allegories in Art*, (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 133.
4. Matilde Battistini. *Astrology, Magic and Alchemy in Art*, (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 346.
5. *Ibid.*, 370.
6. *Ibid.*, 294.

7. Lewis Wolpert. *Malignant sadness: the anatomy of depression*, (New York: Free Press, 1999), 4.
8. Matilde Battistini. *Astrology, Magic and Alchemy in Art*, (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 284.
9. Robert Pippenburg. *The Spirit of Clay: A Classic Guide to Ceramics*, (Farmington Hills, MI: Pebble Press, 1997), 133.
10. Ibid., 240.
11. Matilde Battistini. *Symbols and Allegories in Art*, (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005) 244.
12. Sheldon Cashdan. *The Witch Must Die: how fairy tales shape our lives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 15.
13. James Wasserman. *The Mystery Traditions: Secret Symbols and Sacred Art*, (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2005), 37.
14. Fred Gettings. *Secret Symbolism in Occult Art*, (New York: Harmony Books, 1987), 42.
15. Ibid., 141-143.
16. Ibid., 141.

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